

# Waikato elder honoured

By Charlton Clark

They reckon there are only two people like Henare Tuwhangai left in the country — and he admits he “feels great” that Waikato University has honoured him in recognition of what he is.

For Mr Tuwhangai is possibly the country's most respected kaumatua — “the elder of elders”, in the words of a university statement issued at the time he was awarded an honorary doctorate degree in a ceremony at Ngaruawahia's Turangawaewae Marae in September.

The old man is virtually a walking encyclopaedia of Maori knowledge and a living, breathing reminder of a bygone era in New Zealand's history. He is steeped in knowledge of the old ways and Maori history, traditions and religion.

“I feel great,” he admitted with a twinkle in his eye which his 84 years have failed to dull. “It's an honour isn't it? I feel no different to what I felt when I was invested by Her Majesty the Queen with the QSM (Queen's Service Medal). I was also invested with the Silver Jubilee Medal.”

Henare Tuwhangai was born in Te Kuiti on March 9, 1899. His birth was not registered at a court house in those days, but he's sure of the date because his father wrote it down in the old family Bible.

His father was an adopted son of the Ngati Maniapoto ariki Wahanui, the man who gave the pakeha permission to put the Main Trunk railway and state highway through the King Country.

He first went to school at Tiroa, “way out the back of Mangapehi and Benneydale.” Of the 30 or 40 pupils, there were only three pakeha, people called McKenzie, he recalls. The teacher was a man called Gilbert.

“We could not speak English, we did not know what “no” was and what “yes” was.” But he says he was never punished at school for speaking Maori, unlike many other Maori people around the country.

A year later he went to school in Ongarue, where he lived with an aunt, then he began travelling to school by train to Mangapehi.

“There was a native school in Wainiha (where I was living), but my father did not want me to go to that one. I could not tell why, it was his idea. Because the native school had all Maori children, I suppose.”

But after two years the Education Department refused to continue issuing him a train pass, so he had to go to the native school.

“They expelled me from there because I used to beat the teacher up. I was boss at that school, I used to give all the children hidings. Big boys, I used to give them a hiding too.”

“I did some terrible things at that school. When the inspector came, the



teacher reported me and they expelled me.”

“Then my father sent me to a boarding college in Taumarunui, Hatapuna Presbyterian College, a religious sort of affair. I was not 12 months at that school when I played up.”

“I told the principal that when I left the college, all the boys would follow after me. He started to lecture me

about it, and I said to him, ‘I am going home today anyway, so don't bother me with that’, and off I went.”

“All the boys followed me, and it broke the school up. The church sold it to the racing club.”

But if Henare Tuwhangai and the pakeha education system felt they could get along better without each other, the young Tuwhangai was learning fast and well in a completely different school of learning.

“I just picked it up at home and at meetings,” he says of his vast wisdom and knowledge of Maori history and tradition.

“My father used to take me around all the big Maori meetings. I used to just sit and listen. Most of the children would go out and play, but I was interested, it sounds like a good yarn to me. Sometimes I used to sleep listening to them talk.

“One thing I never did was read a book; it was all from word of mouth. After a time I learnt so much I could go and teach other old folks.”

“About four or five o'clock in the morning my father and mother used to be awake in bed singing songs and telling histories, and that's how I learnt.”

“In the older days I used to have a great memory. You could tell me a story all day and I would get the lot. I could not do it now, but I have not forgotten all the stories I heard.”

When he quit the college, aged 15, he went home to his father. “I told Dad I had not come back to loaf. I was going to find a job, and off I went. I never went back to live off my parents. I ‘paddled my own canoe.’” he said.

After school he was apprenticed to a blacksmith, and he soon showed a liking for hard work. He recalls that several of his employers told him to come back if he ever needed a job — although he did manage to get sacked from his job as a seaman on a coastal trading ship.

At one time he worked for Cashmore Brothers' sawmill in the King Country, and helped build the Great South Road from Otahuhu to Papakura.

He played on the wing in rugby as a young man. “I was 16 stone in those days. It would take a little bit of stopping me when I had my way on!”

He met his late wife, Kurakino Pompey, in Gordonton, when, after building the road a friend asked him for a lift to Whatapaka, “Which is a marae today. I was at the big meeting there last month.” He wanted to head south to visit his parents, but his friend persuaded him to stay with his family.

That invitation led to marriage, and starting work as a shearer, which saw him through the Depression with money in his pocket.

“I broke the world's record in 1943; and held it for 10 years.” That record was 413 sheep sheared in a nine-hour day.